Review Journal of Political Philosophy
Volume 8.2

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Naomi Zack's Ethics for Disaster

Edited by

J. Jeremy Wisnewski

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS
PUBLISHING

Review Journal of Political Philosophy Volume 8.2:
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This book first published 2011

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-2653-7, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-2653-2
ISSN 1752-2056

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All journals benefit from the good graces of those academics who volunteer their time to make journals run smoothly and professionally. The lion's share of thanks for the journal goes to members of the editorial board. In particular, I would like to thank the following individual persons for their continual help:

Thom Brooks, University of Sheffield
Janet Donohoe, West Georgia State University
R. D. Emerick, Palomar College
Gordon Hull, University of North Carolina, Charlotte
Glen Pettigrove, University of Auckland
Jose-Antonio Orosco, Oregon State University
Mark Sanders, University of North Carolina, Charlotte
Matthew Voorhees, Hartwick College
P.A. Woodward, East Carolina University

I would also like to thank Naomi Zack, as well as the contributors in this volume, for their excellent work. Finally, I want to thank the editorial staff at Cambridge Scholars Publishing, and in particular Amanda Millar, for continuing support of the journal.

EDITORIAL NOTE ON THE CURRENT VOLUME

The *Review Journal of Political Philosophy* is devoted to the exploration of important contributions to our moral and political conversations. To this end, the journal will occasionally devote issues to topics and works that are of special significance. Naomi Zack's *Ethics for Disaster* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), the title of which indicates both its content and its importance, is one such recent work. This volume of *RJPP* is devoted to the further exploration, elaboration, and criticism of this important book. For those unfamiliar with the work, this volume also features an overview of the central points of the work in Naomi Zack's reply to the contributors.

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ZACK, RACE, AND THE LANGUAGE OF DISASTERS

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Currently, "Niger is now facing the worst hunger crisis in its history, with almost half the country's population in desperate need of food and up to one in six children suffering from acute malnutrition…"[1] One wonders how wide spread knowledge of this disaster is in the United States. It is not cited prominently in my local newspaper nor given extensive attention on national media outlets. Yet, we can say without fear of contradiction it is a disaster. Thinking about the drought in Niger and the problems of both disaster planning and response, Professor Zack's book *Ethics for Disaster*[2], is a clarion call for collective action to help alleviate the suffering of people worldwide caused by disasters. She is on point that many of the world's disasters are not even noted in countries like the United States. Events that are labeled disaster in the United States often have lower numbers of persons injured or killed than the numbers seen in other countries. Consider that *Infoplease* places former US Senator Ted Stevens's death in a plane crash among its disasters listed for August 2010. Stevens's death is cited along with the news that, at least 1,600 are now estimated dead in Pakistan floods.[3] While Stevens's death is newsworthy, it does not seem to merit the label of disaster. Such is the US media imbalance regarding the nature and status of events deemed disasters. Yet, events, like Stevens's death, in the United States, garner media attention and the impact of disasters on the rest of the world, unless they are a big news story, for example the Haitian earthquake, are generally past over. Thus, there is an imbalance in the reporting of

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[1] http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/38704472/ns/world_news-africa/ Date accessed 08/14/10

[2] Naomi Zack, *Ethics for Disaster*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009. Print.

[3] http://www.infoplease.com/news/2010/current-events/science-disasters_aug.html #axzz0zG1sPEaD Date accessed 09/09/10.

worldwide disasters in the United States. This media imbalance has an impact on how many United States citizens view the problems of disaster planning and response around the world. The problems/disasters seem remote, distant, and infrequent. One could list the numerous disasters that are impacting on the lives of millions of persons outside of the United States that are given little or no attention here.

In this regard, Zack's book highlights the fact that there is a serious failure to prepare for disasters even in those areas that we know are prone to natural disasters. I wonder what has been done since the Niger drought of 2005 to prepare for this current drought. It seems clear that the response and planning for future droughts have fallen short of what is needed to prevent or at least ameliorate suffering. Niger is not the only disaster were disaster response and planning seem to fall short. Some of the disasters are the result of human interaction with the environment. Oils spills and the dumping of toxic waste are having disastrous consequences on the people of Nigeria and other African countries. However, in the United States there is great concern and news coverage over the oil spill in the Gulf Coast but little attention is given to the decades of oil spills in regions of Nigeria and the total in terms of human life and misery that has been afflicted there.[4] What should we call "bad things" that continue happen years after the initial event? Should we call these events that seem to emulate from earlier disasters, disasters? Particularly, since little was done to prepare for what governmental officials knew or should have known would take place if some meaningful plans and preparations were not made and followed. The conditions that exist years later are often called "social problems."

Bad things are still happening in the aftermath of the droughts, the oil spills, the hurricanes, and the earthquakes. Proactive disaster response and planning are seriously needed. Around the world there is a need to address the suffering of persons impacted by disasters. Zack notes: "Throughout this book, it is assumed that moral values—the primary one being human life—are absolute.[5] This means among other things that we have to be concern with human suffering, particularly that caused by disasters. Zack is correct in that if we are concerned with human suffering and motivated to aid those persons who are suffering, we need an "Ethics For Disaster."

[4] http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/may/30/oil-spills-nigeria-niger-delta-shell Date accessed 08/15/10

[5] Zack, p. 131

Defining Disasters

What then is a disaster? According to Zack,

> A disaster is an event (or series of events) that harms or kills a significant number of people or otherwise severely impairs or interrupts their daily lives in civil society. Disasters may be natural or the result of accidental or deliberate human action. Disasters include, but are not limited to, fires; floods; storms; earthquakes; chemical spills; leaks of, or infiltration by, toxic substances; terrorist attacks by conventional, nuclear, or biological weapons; epidemics; pandemics; mass failures in electronic communications; and other events that officials and experts designate "disasters." Disasters always occasion surprise and shock; they are unwanted by those affected by them, although not always unpredictable. Disasters also generate narratives and media representations of the heroism, failures, and losses of those who are affected and respond.[6]

Zack thinks that this definition leaves "room to argue critically inclusion in the "disaster" category of ongoing disruptive events that have not yet been designated "disasters." Accordingly this definition leaves out the effects on humans caused by military conflicts. The reasoning here is that crisis researchers have traditionally distinguished conflict situations from disasters. Even with this distinction there are more than enough events that can be classified as disasters. While there is much to discuss in this thought provoking and insightful text, I want to explore briefly two points in Zack's book. First, the role that being disadvantage and a member of a "racial' group that is seen as less worthy of human treatment plays in disaster preparation and response and second her exposing a lexical gap[7] in our disaster language.

Race, Disaster and Hurricane Katrina

Laurence Houston, a former student of mine from New Orleans, reflected that to call the remembrance of date of the devastation an "anniversary" only works for those who watched the impact of the hurricane from the comfort of their homes via television. For him and many other victims of the disaster of Katrina this is not an anniversary. It is a grim annual reminder of how their lives were upset and remain disrupted five years later.

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[6] Zack page 7

[7] David Crystal, *A Dictionary of Linguistics & Phonetics*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004. Print.

Still, in the past month there has been a great deal of news media coverage of what many call the "fifth anniversary" of Hurricane Katrina. There are, however, still sections of New Orleans that are devastated five years after the initial event. In the case of Hurricane Katrina we see both the bad effects of both disaster preparation and response. To many observers, particularly poor persons of color, the local, state and federal response has been as horrible as the Hurricane itself. Many of the former and current citizens of New Orleans feel that they were victims before, during and after the Hurricane.[8] My focus will be on the response to the hurricane and the "bad things" that seem to ensue after the event.[9] In the case of New Orleans one is also reminded of the fact that areas of New Orleans are still unaffected by disaster plans to rebuild and restore the city to its former status. Zack correctly asks what was/is the role of race in the disaster planning and response to Katrina.

Zack takes on movie producer and director Spike Lee's presentation of the events and effects of the Hurricane on the lives of the black citizens of New Orleans. Lee presents his view in his film: When *the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts (An American Tragedy).* Zack's primary criticism of Lee seems to be that he does not give a balance account of the facts of the Hurricane.

> "Moreover, on the issue of race and racism, we should note that racism against poor African Americans is not the whole story about what went wrong, or what was right, in the response to Katrina. Spike Lee made no attempt at a thorough description of the storm dynamics of Hurricane Katrina, the problems with the models of hurricanes used by or the complexity of the weather conditions in New Orleans when Katrina hit. Some disaster officials now believe that the response effort in New Orleans was successful in two ways: the U.S. Coast Guard rescued over thirty-three thousand; the Houston Astrodome, dubbed "Reliant City," provided temporary shelter and living supplies for sixty-five thousand evacuees for twenty-one days, until it had to be evacuated because of Hurricane Rita."[10]

Indeed the failure to plan and respond was much more involved than institutional racism aimed at racial genocide against black Americans.

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[8] Nance, Earthea. "Making the Case For Community-Based Laboratories" *Race, Place, and Environmental Justice after Hurricane Katrina: Struggles to Reclaim, Rebuild, and Revitalize New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.* Ed. Robert D. Bullard and Beverly Wright. Boulder, CO: Westview, 2009. 159.

[9] Bullard, Robert D. *The Quest for Environmental Justice: Human Rights and the Politics of Pollution*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 2005.

[10] Zack, p. 121

Indeed Zack notes, "Well before Katrina, African Americans had already been excluded and discriminated against on economic or cultural grounds without race, per se, ever being an explicit issue." When one checks the references for this claim, we find that it is Zack's own work[11] and the work of Glenn Loury.[12] While these are two eminent scholars one would have expected ones that had some social distance from the issue at hand.

Zack may indeed be correct about the role of race and racism in the case of New Orleans. I have my doubts because it has been the case that whites have suffered because of social policies meant to deny public goods and services to blacks. Indeed we should keep in mind that the fact that white people are affected does not mean that anti-black racism was not a factor in the planning, response and the treatment afterwards. The United States, in particular, has had and still has a horrible record regarding public policies and the environmental regard for blacks. In some cases it can be argued that race and class can be separated clearly. I have argued elsewhere that this separation of race and class can be seen in the housing market. Blacks were and still are discriminated in the selling of houses based on race.[13] Blacks are denied housing not because they cannot afford the housing but because they are black.[14] We must be careful when we try to combine race and class or that class alone can explain governmental or personal policies. I am not attributing that sort of reasoning to Zack. However, I do want to present as an example, *The Huffington Post* article of September 11, 2010. The article reports on the racial discrimination lawsuit pressed by African American comedian George Willborn. Willborn alleges that he is being denied the right to purchase a 1.7 million dollar house because he is black. It is not class or financial status that seems to be at issue here, it is race. On the other hand, perhaps, it is the fact that Willborn is a comedian that is the sticking point.[15]

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[11] Naomi Zack, *Thinking about Race* (Belmont, CA: Thomas Wadsworth, 2005), ch 5. Print.

[12] Glenn C. Loury, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University press, 2002). Print.

[13] http://portal.hud.gov/portal/page/portal/HUD/topics/housing_discrimination Date accessed 09/09/10

[14] Bill E. Lawson, "Racist Property Holdings and Environmental Coalitions: Addressing Memories of Environmental Injustice" in Echoes from the Poisoned Well Edited by Sylvia Hood Washington, Heather Goodall, and Paul Rosier Lexington Books, 2006, pp 97-108. Print.

[15] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/08/27/george-willborn-and-famil_n_697219.html Date accessed 09/09/10

Zack would or should admit that in the West we have been habituated to see many Non-Western peoples as inferior beings and as such not worthy of the same respect we give our Western counterparts. In Niger, for example, lack of media attention and the lack of empathy with people who are poor and blacks makes it difficult for many American citizens both black or white to say there but for the grace of God go I. It may be the case that lack of racial empathy plays a major factor in the environmental response. In the United States persons of African descent (African Americans) are subject to the same type of disdain. The Willborn lawsuit, if it has merit, shows how race comes in to play in people's behavior and can impact the lives of persons of color even during normal times. Disasters, as Zack notes, have worse effects on those who are disadvantaged in normal times. If race and racism are the biases that perpetuate social injustice, these are unlikely to change quickly during future disaster preparation or during the immediate response.[16] This does not mean that there will be no positive disaster response, if the need is great and conveyed. It does mean that racial attitudes about the victims of the disasters are still in play. See for example the comparison of the alleged behavior of whites in Nashville during the May 2010 flood and the behavior of blacks in New Orleans during Katrina.[17] We must admit that there is and has been a general social understanding that the behavior of blacks and whites differ drastically. This difference in behavior manifests itself in the disregard for the welfare of certain poor and racially defined groups. Whites were worthy of support and blacks were not.

This is not to claim that this is the morally correct way to behave but to only note any disaster ethic has to discuss the problem of racism and its manifestation in detail. To Zack's credit she broaches this topic but since the main focus of her work is establishing the need to consider a general disaster ethics she cannot be faulted for not spending a great deal of time or space on this issue. Still this issue is imbedded in the body of her text. How do we retrain persons to overcome centuries of disregard for certain persons on this planet? One possible way is to follow Zack's lead and work to develop an ethics of disaster. This approach still has another hurdle to overcome and it is embedded in the language of disaster. [18]

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[16] Zack, p, 126

[17] http://www.thepoliticalcesspool.org/jamesedwards/2010/05/16/nashville-vs-new-orleans/ Date accessed 09/09/10

[18] Adrienne Lehrer, Semantic *Fields and Lexical Structure*. London: North Holland, 1974. Print.

The Language of Disaster

The language used to discuss, explain, and plan for a disaster is important. Zack raises some interesting questions Accordingly, "Definitions of disaster acquire a new importance after the moral dimension of disaster is considered, human beings have always altered their environments to their needs and wants. Advances in technical expertise, scientific understanding, and moral concern for all human life and well-being have enabled more active, proactive, and critical attitudes to both natural and human-caused catastrophes." A general concern for the suffering of other should motivate our being proactive in our response to disasters. "Not only does the claim that we ought to do something imply that we can do it, but what we can do invokes moral reflection because it affects our own and others' well-being."[19] But as important for Zack is the position that "Now, accompanying definitions of disaster is the assumption that action can be taken to prevent, prepare for, and better respond to it, Our motivation and ability to interact with the causes and effects of disasters in this way enables the moral dimension of disaster."

Zack's understanding of both human suffering and disaster go beyond those time specific events of mass human suffering, i.e., the earthquake in Haiti or the Pacific tsunami. She notes in a lengthy quote worth citing:

> Insofar as disasters are mass events that we not want, the disaster-specific factor of human intervention and reaction can be extended to other mass events that we do not want, which are less compressed in time than events now considered disasters. Vehicular accidents, AIDs, world hunger, the civilian effects of war, and extreme financial crises are examples of extended events that could be considered disasters. Global warming is already recognized to be a cause of disasters. It should be noted that in affluent societies, some of these risks, such as vehicular accidents and financial crises are already treated as disasters in terms of response. [20]

Again, Zack provides much to discuss about responses to disasters. She forces us to reflect on how the starving and the pollution that exist after the memory of the initial events fades and the suffering of the poor become normalized. At that point their condition is seen as a "social problem." As a "social problem" the conditions are divorced from the disaster and the response that aggravated these conditions. Here I move away from Zack's analysis. She is correct about the failure to appreciate the connection between the suffering that some humans experience because

[19] Zack, p. 127.
[20] Zack, p. 127.

certain kinds of suffering are seen as social problems and not disasters. In the end, these sufferings are seen as normal and the response to them are muted. There is a marked difference in the response to disaster and the response to social problems.

> The inclusion of all destructive events or episodes with high human casualties that occur over longer periods of time than those we now consider disasters is more than a semantic matter, Once an event is as a disaster, both private and public sectors become more directly mobilized and motivated to prevent, mitigate, prepare for, respond to, and recover from it. However, after very destructive events or conditions, such as AIDs, or global starvation, persist for a while, in the absence of the intense response associated with recognized disasters, people become habituated to them as "social problems" in normal life, Such habituation to catastrophe insulates those who are safe and could otherwise intervene, leading to the neglect of sufferers and victims. There may be objective improvement over time as the problems run their historical course or concerned individuals and small groups make humanitarian efforts to solve them, but the longer the process of habituation or normalization, the less the likelihood of compressed effective solutions.[21]

While I think that Zack is correct here, I want to point out or draw attention to the fact that attitudes about the poor and raced victims of disasters, impact on the response and planning for disasters, and an appeal to human concern or moral principles may not be effected in developing a disaster ethic that includes these individuals. Race and racism plays a role in disaster response and planning and that with Zack I agree that to call acts of human suffering social problem obscures the social history that gave rise to the problem.

The lack of adequate disaster response and planning is especially acute in countries in Africa and in certain cities in the United States. In New Orleans, for example, the government sanctioned acts of environmental disregard (disasters). These acts of disregard seem to have a racial component. Zack carefully avoids any hint or discussion of racism as a cause for the poor response and planning. She attempts to show that conspiracies of genocide particularly in the case of New Orleans may have been over stated. This reading of the environmental history of New Orleans has to be read against the history of race and racism in the United States. It makes the negative environmental actions and conditions in New Orleans seem ahistorical. Environmental policies in New Orleans has a racist history. I contend that the “taming” of disasters exposes a gap in our

[21] Zack, p. 128

moral and political lexicon. Philosopher Adrienne Lehrer proposed that when a language lacks a word to describe an event or thing there exist a " lexical gap." [22] There are various types of lexical gaps. Some for example are translational. One language does not have a term that matches a concept in another language. The only kind of lexical gap a speaker is generally aware of is a functional gap—the lack of a convenient word to express what one wants to talk about. I want to suggest that there is a lexical gap in our disaster vocabulary. We have no term to connect the initial event with current social ills. I want to suggest that this is needed in order to prevent the fading of the doing of social wrongs. There should be a term that connects the dumping of toxic waste and the current health problems. Failing to connect the disaster response to what is now called a social problem divorces the initial wrong and poor response from the current ills. It also allows problematic, racist and sexist, views of the victims to be covered over by expressions of concern for current social problems. Zack is correct that we tend to "tame" disasters. This "taming" is rooted in the language of disaster awareness. If we take this approach, persons will see the Willborn case as a current social problem, there is currently some housing discrimination, and not think that it connected to the historical disaster of chattel slavery and racism in the United State. [23] The history of colonialism and its racist legacy must be factored into disaster responses in Africa, and indeed worldwide. An ethics of Disaster must take the social, and, yes, racial and gendered, history of a country in to account in its final formation. It has to do this to ensure that the move to protect individuals is not a mask for continued racist or sexist practices.

In sum, Zack has done the area of disaster planning and response a great service. However, she has also exposed to us who work in applied ethics a problems that has not been adequately addressed in the philosophical literature. She exposes in a profound sense the manner in which our language is in adequate to deal with the after effects of disasters and that the term "social problems" does not do the problematic justice, nor give the needed impetus to respond in morally acceptable ways to disasters and to those conditions which are known to be prone to disasters. This is especially important in those instances where the potential or actual

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[22] Adrienne Lehrer, *Semantic Fields and Lexical Structure*. London: North Holland, 1974. For a discussion of closing a lexical gap see Eve V Clark, *The Lexicon in Acquisition*. Cambridge [England: Cambridge UP, 1993.

[23] See for example my discussion of lexical gaps in United States history and the issues of understanding the impact of chattel slavery on African Americans in McGary, Howard, and Bill E. Lawson. *Between Slavery and Freedom: Philosophy and American Slavery*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992, pp 71-89. Print.

victims are poor and non-white. Her discussion of the effect of viewing human suffering as "social problems" and not disasters is insightful. She cannot be faulted for focusing on a disasters ethics that has as it main goal the respecting of individuals. Zack here relies on the liberal understanding of the ultimate self worth of each individual and our ability to appreciate this worth and do what is necessary to respect it and preserve it. Ought implies can! She is to be commended for exposing that there is more to disaster language than meets the ear. We may admit that this lacuna must be filled[24] and that Zack's project has merit without its being addressed. Without the issues of race, class and gender, this approach is indeed an easier sell that than tying disaster ethics to the suffering of poor disadvantaged women, children, the poor in general, and persons of color who have most often been the victims of disaster response and planning.

[24] For a discussion of closing a lexical gap see Eve V Clark, *The Lexicon in Acquisition*. Cambridge [England: Cambridge UP, 1993.

BUILDING THE ROAD AHEAD: FROM "ETHICS FOR DISASTER" TO "OBLIGATION FROM DISASTER"

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Disasters are curious things. They occur regularly yet remain unexpected; they disorient yet bring clarity of purpose; they call for urgent action yet mire us in red tape; they fray individual psyches yet reaffirm social bonds; they challenge old ways of doing things yet prompt yearning for the *status quo*. These contradictions render disasters a rich but ignored subject of philosophical inquiry. The current drive to overcome this ignorance stems not just from the curiosity of intellectual minds but from the realities of our physical world. The United Nations estimates that every year more than 200 million people around the globe are directly affected by environmental disasters triggered by floods, earthquakes, fires, hurricanes and tsunamis—nearly five times the number directly affected by war and other conflicts over the past decade (UNHCR 2006: 207). Moreover, these numbers don't include terrorist attacks or massive industrial accidents such as Chernobyl, or Bhopal, or British Petroleum's deepwater gusher in the Gulf. When these incidents are added to the list, disasters become some of the most significant cultural events of our times, simultaneously exposing our collective vulnerabilities and challenging us to rethink how we address them.

One way to proceed is to downplay these challenges. This is our current approach, and it takes several interlocking forms. First, it emphasizes the statistical improbability of each specific disaster, casting public concern as irrational unless tied to a clear enemy, with a clear motive. Second, it limits disaster preparation and response to a small, if well-meaning, circle of professionals, who develop plans without much public input or awareness. And third, once disaster happens, it restricts government response to a short time period before handing over quickly to market forces. These approaches maintain the *status quo*, muddy clear thinking, and preclude ethical planning. This is the thesis of Naomi

Zack's wonderfully provocative *Ethics for Disaster*. In it, Zack pushes us to think and plan better for disasters and lays out the ethical reasons why we should. These reasons are developed through a series of arguments that can be bluntly summarized by the proclamation that clearer thinking and better planning for disaster aren't just good ideas, they are our moral obligation. This obligation extends beyond individuals to governments, and beyond preparation to response, and it is a moral issue because it involves human dignity and well-being, which are intrinsically valuable. What makes Zack's book so engaging is her ability to bring fresh, direct thinking to these issues by dragging the ethical dimensions of disaster into the light for all to consider. Along the way, Zack encourages us to think, plan and act more effectively not only for own safety but for the everyday wellbeing of humans everywhere.

In this essay, I join Zack in this endeavor. As a sociologist who has experienced and conducted research on a recent, major disaster—Hurricane Katrina—I will try to widen and complement Zack's more philosophical efforts with social scientific insights where I can. I start by shamelessly reducing Zack's thesis to a simple formula: *Disaster x Ethics = Obligation*. I then unpack this formula below, through a series of three basic questions that Zack encourages us to consider clearly and openly: What is a disaster? Why should we care? And, what should we do about it?

What is a Disaster? – A Looking Glass Event

The question of how to define disaster is no simple matter. Scholars have spent volumes debating it. Should disaster include wars, riots, genocide and other forms of social conflict? Should it be properly understood as arising from inside or outside everyday social structures? Is it an event or a process? Do "natural" disasters differ significantly from "technological" disasters? Are such distinctions possible anymore? Who ultimately should decide such things: citizens, political officials, experts? Thorny questions such as these arise because disaster is more than a commonly used term; it is a concept that scholars hone to clarify and reveal specific points they wish to make. For Zack's purposes, the aim is to clarify and reveal how we can better plan for disasters and why we are ethically obliged to do so. This analytical focus builds from a particular conceptualization of disaster, which while useful for some purposes, may be less so for others. In this section, I take a closer look at the different sides of Zack's definition: what it reveals, what it misses, and what we

might usefully recover and reintegrate for a more resilient and dignified future.

Let's start with a central argument of Zack's book and build from there. In the preface, she tells us that, "we should not too easily give up our ordinary moral institutions, before the fact, while there is still time to plan" (p.xiii). By this, she means that we should not plan for disaster by planning to give up our usual code of ethics for a different code of "disaster ethics" when the time comes (e.g., by planning to conduct medical triage in the event of a chemical disaster because it is known in advance that emergency responders will have insufficient numbers of respirators to distribute to everyone in need). Zack asks why not plan better to help all those who will need assistance? And, why not do this by training those who can help themselves to do so effectively, leaving public assistance to those who need it most? The underlying point is a simple but important one: We need more transparent and deliberate planning for disasters. But this point also rests on a definition of disaster that, as Zack acknowledges, is "after the fact." From this perspective, disasters become what disasters evoke, that is, they become defined by what comes next.

One of the strengths of this approach is that it helps Zack distinguish disaster from its close cousins, risk and social problems—an analytically necessary step if one is to develop an ethics specifically for disaster. Broadly put, Zack explains that disasters differ from risk and social problems because, in addition to affecting large numbers of people, which risk and social problems also do, disasters evoke two things that these other two phenomena do not: hot fear and expectations of urgent response. Both of these things come after the event itself, are culturally determined, and thus tell us as much about ourselves as they do the events they alternately magnify and seek to minimize.

The defining characteristics of hot fear are that it is public, shocking, and spreads through contagion, with fear in others igniting fear in ourselves—a Rooseveltian worst case. To clarify, Zack gives us the contrasting examples of terrorist attacks and traffic accidents. Although the latter kill far more people each year, they are not shocking because we have culturally normalized them into the everyday risk of driving. Thus, they require no urgent planning or response beyond mundane traffic rules and occasional enforcement. Terrorist attacks, by contrast, are quite different, as are potential pandemics, earthquakes, chemical explosions, and other spectacular mass catastrophes. Within our everyday cultural framework, these events are understood to be disasters because they disrupt our everyday sense of what is normal and acceptable, which

triggers expectation of urgent, focused response—the other thing that disasters evoke that risk and social problems generally do not.

As Zack explains, to declare something a disaster is to declare it worthy of immediate attention and corrective action. In this sense, it is similar to declaring war on a social problem such as poverty, drugs, or illiteracy, but with a much more acute sense of urgency. What hampers planning for such events, however, is that we don't know when the next disaster will occur, or in what form. All we know is that it will occur, eventually. This predictable unpredictability of disasters, Zack argues, comingles with hot fear and expectations of urgent response to cloud our thinking about how best to plan for such response. It also encourages us to place our thinking about these issues within a relatively small circle of emergency professionals who tend to see disasters as special events, requiring a different set of ethics than everyday life. Zack thinks this is a mistake. She contends that if we're going to plan for disasters in advance, we should plan instead to maintain our usual code of ethics (e.g., plan to save all who can be saved with the best preparation, rather than plan to implement triage as a result of insufficient preparation) and to make these plans public, since ultimately they will affect the public. The implication is that there is no excuse for planning to do the best we can do "under the circumstances" or for keeping such plans behind closed doors. Instead, we must plan better for what we will need during these events. And, the ultimate aim should not be to get back to normal as quickly as possible but rather to *stay* normal throughout the event by planning beforehand for the full array of resources needed to do so. Moving in this direction, Zack argues, will make our everyday ethics not only more disaster resistant, but disaster ready.

By treating disasters in this way—as given and proceeding from there—Zack is able to push the concept beyond factual losses of life and property into the realm of cultural interpretation and ethical deliberation. Pulling these threads together yields a definition of disaster that runs roughly as follows: an unexpected event that harms many people in a way that disrupts a cultural sense of normalcy, raising ethical questions about what should be done. What is interesting sociologically about this conceptualization is how closely it parallels classic definitions of disaster offered by early researchers in the field, and how this similarity misses some important insights derived from more recent theoretical deliberations in the field, which could help extend moral questions about disaster into new terrain, beyond emergency planning and rapid response. Without consideration of these efforts, Zack runs the risk of treating the symptoms but not the causes of disasters. To avoid this fate, and to stretch our

ethical deliberations about disaster further, it is useful to review how conceptualizations of disaster have shifted broadly within the social sciences over recent decades, and how these shifts might contribute to a more comprehensive ethics for disaster.

To begin, perhaps the most influential sociological definition of disaster comes from Charles Fritz (1961), who characterized disasters as non-routine events that disrupt the social order, prompting adjustment and response. The underlying logic is much the same as Zack's: social stability > disruptive event > social response. For early sociologists, this conceptualization was grounded at the macro level in systems theory, which focuses on social order, and grounded at the micro level in symbolic interationism, which focuses on the everyday construction of social reality by ordinary people going about their daily routines. Both approaches share Zack's focus on disasters as acute events and the realist notion that such events emerge from "out there," beyond society, in ways that strike unpredictably to disrupt it. With these similarities, it is perhaps unsurprising that both older disaster research and Zack's more recent philosophical efforts share a similar analytical focus: preparing for and quickly responding to unexpected, external threats. However, contemporary disaster studies have begun to rethink this conceptualization and its implications.

This re-evaluation is associated most notably with the work of geographer Gilbert White, who focused on disasters caused by environmental hazards, since they were (and remain) the most commonly declared type of disaster. According to White, such disasters should be seen less as events and more as ongoing outcomes of social actions (and inactions) that limit adjustments to environmental extremes. Within this framework, hazards become part of normal, long-term environmental processes, and disasters become not unexpected events but examples of (uneven) social vulnerabilities to these normal, expected processes. This interpretation implies that disasters are not things that impose themselves unexpectedly from outside society but forms of disruption that emerge from within society, through failures to anticipate, endure, resist, and recover from interactions with the physical world around us. Anthony Oliver-Smith (1986) illustrates this conceptual difference in his account of the devastating Peruvian earthquake of 1970. He does this by juxtaposing the traditional settlement and planning practices of pre-colonial peoples in the region, which minimized disruptions from regular seismic processes and events, to colonial settlement practices, which maximized these disruptions through increased demographic concentration and social inequalities along known faults. The overarching point is that we should not simply treat

disasters as given and proceed from there, "after the fact," to consider how best to respond. Instead, we should also conceptualize disasters "before the fact" as dynamic reflections of how we organize ourselves with respect to known risks. The implication is not only that better planning for disaster means better planning *from* disaster, but that risk and disaster aren't as distinct as Zack's approach might otherwise suggest.

This line of thinking is consistent with Perrow's (2007) recent arguments in *The Next Catastrophe*. Like Zack, Perrow begins by taking mass catastrophes as given, but unlike Zack, he focuses on their social pre-conditions because he has little faith in the organizations we have created to prevent, prepare and respond to disasters. History shows that more often than not they fail spectacularly and ungracefully (e.g., the Mineral Management Service in the case of the current Gulf oil gusher; FEMA in the case of Hurricane Katrina; the Federal Regulatory Commission in the case of the recent financial disaster, and so forth). Thus, the solution is not to give these actors more power and responsibility "after the fact"; it is to think more clearly about what causes everyday risks to become full-blown disasters and minimize these in advance. For Perrow, these causes can be whittled down to concentrated hazards (such as toxins and seismic faults); concentrated populations (in risky areas); and concentrated power (which resists adequate planning and regulation). The argument is that disasters happen at the intersection of these three hazards, and the only real solution is to defuse these causes by deconcentrating risks, people, and power wherever possible, so that inevitable catastrophes do not become major disasters.

These are Perrow's ethics for disaster: Don't rely on government response after the fact; minimize the fact, or likelihood of the event, beforehand. And, regardless of whether one agrees with the feasibility of his prescriptions, the implication remains the same: Planning ethically and adequately for disaster requires that we address root causes in addition to emergency responses. Failure to do so can place undue emphasis on restoring the *status quo ante* as quickly as possible after the fact, which may have been part of the problem, or disaster, to begin with. Integrating this perspective with Zack's enriches her position by connecting it to recent theoretical deliberations in the field of disaster studies and by extending moral questions of planning and response to include those of planning and prevention. In the process we are encouraged to look inward, not just outward, for the sources of our vulnerability and to respond ethically in advance, as well as after the fact, by examining how we structure society, not just emergency response.

Why Should We Care? – Beyond Disaster as Method

Having considered why disasters are more than what disasters evoke—they are also what cause them—we can turn to the second piece of the *Disaster x Ethics = Obligation* framework. I unpack this piece through the simple question of why we should care about disasters, not as individuals but as members of a political collective capable of action. One of the compelling things about Zack's book is that she tackles this question head on, explaining clearly and explicitly that we, and the government we create and entrust with our safety, should care about disaster because individual well-being and dignity are at stake, which goes to the core of why we form and empower governments in the first place. Before engaging this point directly, though, it is useful to review why we philosophers and social scientists—the academic we, rather than the political we—have tended to care about disasters. Then we can turn our attention to why we, as members of a body politic, should care and the government structures that currently stand in our way.

I'll begin with Zack's discussion of blowing up the fat man and other disaster parables. In the example of the fat man, we are told that an obese spelunker is blocking the exit of a sea cave and that the rest of his party will surely drown if they don't use the stick of dynamite at their disposal to blow him up and push through to safety. The scenario is intended to illustrate the moral dilemma of whether to kill the innocent to save the greatest number (consequentialism) or to retain one's moral duty never to kill the innocent, regardless of the consequences (deontology). In this way, the story is a useful pedagogical device for clarifying the foundations of our moral thinking and when, if ever, we should make exceptions. However, underlying this pedagogical utility is the equally revealing point that philosophers typically treat disasters and other worst cases as teaching tools, rather than as things to be parsed and analyzed in themselves. Philosophers, in other words, tend to care about disasters because of what they can reveal about more fundamental problems, such as how to distinguish ethical systems. This "disaster as method" is also evident in the social sciences.

In the United States, the social study of disasters emerged formally during the 1950s with the help of the federal government, which sought to learn more about how individuals and communities would respond to nuclear assault, which looked imminent at the height of the Cold War. Did people panic and revert to a Hobbesian state of nature, marked by chaotic combativeness? Or, did people behave rationally and compassionately, assisting rather hampering response and recovery?

Implicit in these early research questions was the idea that citizens could expect government to spring to action whenever catastrophe struck and that proper planning for such action requires good social science. Because sociologists could not ethically drop warheads on the subjects they studied, they fanned out to record and analyze social responses to large-scale disasters triggered by tornados, earthquakes, hurricanes and other environmental surrogates. What they found was not a Hobbesian state of nature but communities of benevolent actors—some pre-existing, some emergent—that typically took great strides to help one another. Sociologists came to call this response the "therapeutic community," wherein routine divisions fade as local residents come together across everyday social lines to help one another respond and recover. In her recent book, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit (2009) celebrates this type of response as humanity's true state of (utopian) nature—individuals yearning for social connection and clarity of purpose, which disasters ironically seem to bring, at least over the short term and despite myths and fears to the contrary.

Underlying these sociological insights is the same "disaster as method" approach found in traditional philosophical treatments. In both contexts, the "academic we" care about disasters for what they can tell us about other, more fundamental things: our moral systems; our responses to collective crises; our essential nature. What this approach eschews is why we—the broader, governmental we—should care about disasters as events in themselves. Zack uses an optimistic application of social contract theory to mount her case. She begins by reviewing Hobbes and Locke's views on the legitimate bases of democratic governance. She then proceeds to explain that when disasters happen and government is disrupted, victims do not return to an original state of nature, from whence they first entered their social contracts with government. That ship has historically sailed. Instead, disasters deliver victims into "a second state of nature" in which government is temporally dysfunctional but still needed for survival, not because of Hobbesian human aggression but because we have lived too long with government to live sufficiently well without it. This perspective implies that *we*, as government subjects, should care about disasters because disasters put our government—ourselves—to a fundamental test. If government is now required for our wellbeing and dignity, and if these things are intrinsically valuable, then an ethical government should plan the best it can to minimize these threats and render itself fully capable of extracting us from second states of nature when they occur. Notably, this argument takes us beyond the first widely regarded "modern" government response to disaster following the great Lisbon quake of 1755.

As Voltaire notes in *Candide*, the Lisbon quake changed how modern states dealt with disaster, and thus how they defined themselves. Up to that historical juncture, political leaders and subjects had tended to frame and understand disasters as messages from God. They required moral deciphering and repentance, perhaps, but no political action. Following the Lisbon quake, however, the Portuguese Secretary of State, Marquis de Pompal, offered a more natural, or scientific, explanation for such events. This explanation acknowledged that disasters can occur without moral reason but require moral response, not only on the part of individuals, but on the part of the state they entrust. This philosophical shift not only justified the public rebuilding of Lisbon but the idea of the modern state, which came to include an ethical responsibility to help rather than morally condemn citizens in times of disaster. Zack's argument about government's responsibility to deliver us from "second states of nature" extends this view to include not just responding, but *planning* to respond, the best we can and opening these plans to greater democratic input and awareness. On this front, Zack is persuasive. In response, I draw our attention to an overlooked dimension of U.S. government that hinders this ethical charge: its federalist structure. I'll use examples from New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina to illustrate.

The federalist structure of U.S. government receives little attention in discussion of social contracts, but it is consequential for how we respond to disasters as real events, rather than as parables. This structure overlays a separation of executive, legislative and judiciary authority with a blurry separation of local, state and federal jurisdictions. The latter do not *cause* unethical government planning and undemocratic input, but they can contribute to it in two respects. The first way is by creating a system ripe for failure and unaccountability in the face of disaster. This system begins by placing primary responsibility for disaster planning and response in the hands of local jurisdictions that typically have inadequate resources to plan well, and then proceeds to hold them legally and financially responsible for these plans. During Hurricane Katrina, the weakness of this structure became apparent at many stages. It began by leaving a poor city in a hazardous environment with inadequate disaster planning despite prior scientific studies of worst case scenarios. It then discouraged local officials from declaring a mandatory evacuation of residents until the last possible moment because such declarations can leave local jurisdictions legally and financially responsible for those unable to evacuate. Thereafter, once clearly overwhelmed, it left local officials to call on state officials for support, who stepped in just long enough to call on federal officials, adding multiple layers of bureaucracy to the crisis and a

protracted chain of uncertain responsibility and command. A federalist structure such as this might work in normal times to check unbridled power, but it is a poor way to plan and respond well to the ethical challenges presented by disaster.

The second way the U.S. federalist structure contributes to unethical government planning and undemocratic input with respect to disaster is by how it organizes long-term recovery. Undoubtedly, the most important resource for such recovery comes from federal funds. Yet, the official chain of command requires that these federal dollars flow largely through state legislative bodies down to local jurisdictions that have been affected. This arrangement means that how public recovery funds are allocated and to what ends becomes subject disproportionately to state, not local, deliberation. If local, affected jurisdictions are in the minority within these state assemblies, which often occurs, the result can be inadequate assistance without proper representation, as happened in the case of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Although the federal government poured billions of dollars into the region to help rebuild, much of these funds passed through a state legislature that had long held an ambivalent relationship with the City of New Orleans. This arrangement ultimately meant less democratic input into recovery by residents most directly affected.

The overriding point is that if Zack is correct that we should care about disaster planning and response because fundamental principles of democratic government are at stake, then it follows that we should also care about how this planning and response are implemented. If it is through a government structure that complicates these efforts and disenfranchises those most directly affected, then we need to rethink this structure and open bigger, better channels for proper planning and democratic input. To do so is to take disasters seriously in themselves, rather than treating them merely as methods of discovery. This line of thinking leads to the final piece of my organizing framework, obligation.

What Should We Do? – Obligation and Disadvantage

If disasters are about causes as well as responses, and if ethics are about better execution as well as planning, then we can think of obligation as a product of these two. By obligation I mean two things distinct from ethics. The first is a deeper time commitment than the one implied by the important but relatively shallow period of emergency response that Zack highlights; the second is a more targeted commitment to assist those most in need, which Zack addresses but does not develop fully. Together, these